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THE CUSTOM OF SITTING ON THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE

Professor C. W. Wallace in his recent book, *The Children of the Chapel at Blackfriars, 1597-1603*, advances many novel theories in regard to the stage history of the time, based, he claims, on documents which he has discovered. "So new," says Mr. Wallace, "are the views given by the present materials that not a single opinion or conclusion of my predecessors has served as a basis for restatement" (p. ix). Unfortunately this is true. For, when he begins to draw conclusions, he is, to my mind, a very unsafe guide, and it is often difficult to disentangle from its setting of theory what Mr. Wallace has contributed to our knowledge of fact. As an example of his lack of critical judgment, I should like to call attention to some of the unsound reasoning in his chapter on the custom of sitting on the stage. It seems to me that in most points the material which he himself presents should have led him to very different conclusions.

Mr. Wallace's general thesis in this chapter is: "The fad of sitting on the stage came into vogue with the Blackfriars in 1597. The earliest known allusion to it dates from 1598. It was a custom in no other theatre in Elizabeth's reign" (p. 130).

The statement that the fad originated at Blackfriars, and in 1597, Mr. Wallace rests entirely upon his proof of the other points. The chapter assumes that the fall of 1597 is the time at which the Children of the Chapel began their career at Blackfriars, for the author has previously given much space to proving that such is the case—though his argument is far from convincing.¹ Fundamental to his whole position, then, is the second assertion, that the earliest known allusion to the custom of sitting on the stage dates from 1598.

¹ Since Mr. Wallace's volume appeared, Mr. Chambers, who has probably as sound a knowledge of the history of the Elizabethan stage as any man living, has stated emphatically that there is no convincing evidence for the occupation of Blackfriars by the Children of the Chapel before 1600. Cf. *Mod. Lang. Rev.*, IV, 155, 156, and 161. Mr. Chambers' statement, however, is probably too strong; Mr. Wallace's evidence (p. 57) leaves little room for doubt that Blackfriars had been occupied by Evans with a company of some sort at some time prior to the lease of September 2, 1600. But it has not yet been shown conclusively that this occupation went back to 1597, that it was long or continuous, or that it was certainly by the Children of the Chapel.

"About 1598," says Mr. Wallace, "Sir John Davies in a satirizing sonnet-epigram gives the first evidence" (p. 132). "About 1598" must mean for Mr. Wallace not earlier than the end of 1597. And yet there is clear evidence that Davies' epigrams were in circulation by 1596, for epigram 29 is plainly referred to in Harington's *Metamorphosis of Ajax* of 1596.¹ The same epigram is referred to in Bastard's *Chrestoleros*, published in 1598;² and Guilpin in that year evidently writes with another of Davies' epigrams in mind. Moreover, matters of apparently recent interest that are treated in several of the epigrams fall within the years 1594 and 1595. Epigram 47 refers to Tyrone's rebellion and the war between France and Spain, both of which began in 1595. The reference in the same epigram to the Austro-Turkish war is doubtless to the renewed activities of 1595 and 1596 rather than to the campaigns in the earlier years of the decade, and the lines—

. . . . Nor
Whether the Empire can itselfe maintaine
Against the Turkish power encroaching still—

may indicate that the epigram was written while news of the Turkish successes of 1596 was still reaching England. This epigram, which is next to the last, is the only one that contains a probable reference to an event occurring later than 1595. Two epigrams speak of matters as new. Doubtless the "new water-worke" of epigram 6 alludes to the "forcier" erected in 1594;³ and "the new garden of the Old Temple" mentioned in 22 suggests the event that Stow records in the words, "A great part of this old Temple was pulled downe but of late in the yeare 1595."⁴ One epigram (25) is written on a sonnet of Drayton's *Idea* (1594); another (40) speaks of the capture of Groeningen in 1594, seemingly as "the newest newes," and various others

¹ This Mr. Wallace could have learned by consulting the notes of Grosart's edition of Davies' poems, or those of Dyce's or Bullen's reprint of Davies' epigrams in their editions of Marlowe.

² A passage in *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, Act II, mentions "Kinsader's *Satyrs*, Lodge's *Fig for Momus*, Bastard's *Epigrams*, Leichfield's *Trimming of Nash*." As the play was apparently acted in December, 1597, there is a probability, in spite of possible changes in the manuscript, that Bastard's epigrams as well as Marston's first group of satires were in circulation during 1597. For Bastard this is also indicated by a discussion of his epigrams in a letter of Carleton dated September 13, 1597 (cf. *D.N.B.*, III, 388).

³ Cf. *Encycl. Brit.*, 9th ed., XIV, 825.

⁴ *Survey of London*, ed. Kingsford, II, 87.

refer to older events. There is nothing to indicate the date of epigrams 3 and 28, which refer to the practice of sitting on the stage, unless it be their early place in the series. But though all the extant editions of the epigrams are supposed by some to have been printed after the restrictive measures of 1599, there is no evidence that any of the epigrams were written after 1596.

There is also a somewhat obscure passage in Hall's *Virgidemiarum* (Book I, satire III), entered on the Stationers' Register March 31, 1597, in which "gazing scaffolders," the "synod" of poets, and "leave the naked stage" seem to refer to the custom of sitting on the stage, especially as "scaffold" is used in the satire for stage, and the satire on the poets is similar to that on gallants in later writers.

It is practically certain, then, that the fad originated before 1597. The scarcity of references to the custom before 1600 may be due to its late origin or to the fact that Davies is one of the first of the new satirists who turn from the conventional modes of mediaeval satire with their generalized treatment of social types or their specific attacks practically on women and rogues only, to a realistic treatment of social types or of particular follies, especially those of the gallants. Only Nashe's *Pierce Penilesse*, Greene's *Quip for an Upstart Courtier*, both in prose, and Donne's satires are very notable in the new satire before Davies.

Even without the argument from dates, Mr. Wallace's conclusions can be overthrown. Indeed, the worst examples of his absurdities occur in his attempt to uphold the theory that Blackfriars was the only Elizabethan theater in which the custom existed. In disposing of the usual theory that the practice prevailed in other private theaters also, he very characteristically remarks, "There is no evidence for or against the custom at Whitefriars. I must conclude that it was unknown there" (p. 130). In regard to Paul's, he uses the words of Atticus in *What You Will*, "Let's place ourselves within the curtains, for good faith the stage is so very little, we shall wrong the general eye else very much," as definite evidence that Paul's, where the play was acted, never admitted the custom. But Marston was possibly merely attempting to break up an obnoxious custom through advice in the induction preceding the play; there

is little point to the remark if the custom never prevailed. The stage direction of Percy's *Faery Pastorall*, which is usually regarded as written for Paul's, to the effect that certain properties might be omitted if there was lack of space "by reason of concourse of the People on the Stage," Mr. Wallace rejects because there is no evidence that the play was acted (p. 131, n. 3). But how did it ever enter Percy's head that such conditions as he prepares for could arise?

Then, on the ground that "no public theatre of this period had the custom," a statement which he is to prove later, Mr. Wallace accepts every contemporary allusion to the practice as applying to the remaining private theater, the Blackfriars. Seven works, he finds, contain such allusions. The reference which he cites from Davies' *Epigrams* (3),¹ however, and the two from *Every Man out of His Humour* have in themselves no detail that would connect them with any specific theater. Moreover, in spite of its probable allusion to the stage quarrel with Jonson, a passage in Dekker's *Guls Horne-booke* which advises a gallant how he should act in 1609, gives no necessary indication of what gallants did in 1601. Consequently, Mr. Wallace's use of it as evidence for the custom at Blackfriars during an early period is not convincing. It is not entirely clear to me what Mr. Wallace means by his remarks on *Hamlet*, but the passage cited (III, 2, ll. 286-89) evidently has no connection with the custom of sitting on the stage. The references in the prologue and epilogue of *All Fools*, Mr. Wallace puts after the plague of 1603. Similarly, the reference to "the private house" in the 1604 Induction of *The Malcontent* comes late for the period involved. The allusions of both these plays, though evidently to Blackfriars, would only imply the existence of the custom at Blackfriars during Elizabeth's reign through its existence later. If they are to be accepted as evidence for the period, Middleton's *Black Book* of 1604 (mentioned below) must also be accepted for the public theaters. A second passage in the Induction of *The Malcontent* is interpreted to mean that when the play was acted at Blackfriars, it contained thrusts at the habit of wearing feathers on the stage; but a reading of the whole passage would convince one that the

¹ Epigram 28 of Davies, which specifically says "on the stage," Mr. Wallace uses in connection with the custom of sitting over the stage (p. 135).

satire was directed against the wearing of feathers in general.¹ The remaining passage, which comes from the Induction of *Cynthia's Revels* (acted in 1600 and at Blackfriars), is appropriate enough here, but Mr. Wallace quotes too little of it, and he misinterprets it in several points. Indeed, the whole passage, instead of flattering "the well-wishing stage-patron of the house," as Mr. Wallace argues (p. 132), satirizes unmercifully the gallants who occupy the stage; and, if the custom existed at Blackfriars at this time, Jonson was obviously, like Marston, trying to break it up. Since, however, *Cynthia's Revels* is the first play which the Children are known to have acted at Blackfriars after Burbage secured control of the house,² and since Mr. Wallace's argument for an unbroken occupation of the house by the Children very much earlier than the lease of 1600 is theoretical, it is at least possible that Jonson was protesting against the establishment at Blackfriars of a custom found objectionable elsewhere. In fact, a passage of *Cynthia's Revels* itself—not mentioned by Mr. Wallace—gives evidence that the custom of sitting on the stage was not confined to one theater, and might be interpreted to mean that it was not even confined to private theaters. In one of the riddling games of the play Philautia gives this explanation of why breeches may be called "popular": "Marry, that is, when they are not content to be generally noted in court, but will press forth on common stages and brokers' stalls, to the public view of the world" (IV, 1). Jonson would scarcely have used the plural "stages" if the custom prevailed only at Blackfriars. Furthermore, the whole passage reads like a reference to the public theaters, though it is possible, of course, that the wording "common stages" and "public view of the world" might be applied to the stages of the private theaters in contradistinction to the exclusiveness of the court, which is in the mind of the speaker here.

"These," Mr. Wallace declares, "are the known references to the

¹ Mr. Wallace apparently was misled here and in the discussion of *Hamlet* by a belief that gallants wore their feathers only when sitting on the stage (cf. p. 134, n. 3). It is strange that he should express such an idea in connection with the passage in *The Malcontent* that speaks of one's wearing a feather "up and down the Strand."

² In the Induction of *Cynthia's Revels*, however, there is the following remark: "They say, the *umbra* or ghosts of some three or four plays departed a dozen years since have been seen walking on your stage here." Doubtless a few old plays were produced before the company secured the new *Cynthia's Revels*.

custom of sitting on the stage up to 1604.¹ They establish its origin in the Blackfriars" (p. 134). On the contrary, they only lead us to infer that the custom prevailed there before 1603-4. Indeed, so far as I am aware, Blackfriars is not named in connection with the custom—for *The Malcontent* merely refers to "the private house"—before a passage in *The Devil Is an Ass*, I, 3, which Mr. Wallace does not mention, though he refers to later instances.

So much for the private theaters. Mr. Wallace's argument that no public theater of the time had the custom deals almost entirely with a later period. In fact, he speaks of the Rose as negligible because it "went out of the reckoning about 1603-4" (p. 138). For the period of Elizabeth's reign he argues, indeed, that the custom of sitting on the stage "is not to be confused with a certain practice originating in the public theatres . . . of sitting 'above' or 'over' the stage at the rear" (p. 134).² He bases his conclusion on a supposed distinction between the two customs on the part of those who allude to gallants at the theater and on the representation in extant sketches and pictures of people in the upper room of the stage. Though Mr. Wallace's evidence that spectators sat above the stage in some public theaters may be convincing, this itself does not prove that others did not often sit on the stage in public theaters, while the passages which are used to show that the two customs are kept distinct by writers are of doubtful interpretation. Thus on the following passage from epigram 3 of Davies,

Rufus the Courtier at the theater,
Leaving the best and most conspicuous place,
Doth either to the stage himselfe transferre,
Or through a grate doth shew his double face:
For that the clamorous fry of Innes of Court,
Fills up the priuate roomes of greater price:
And such a place where all may haue resort,
He in his singularity doth dispise,³

¹ A reference to the custom which Mr. Wallace does not include in his list is to be found no doubt in the words of Act II, l. 308, of *Histrionmastix*, "Give your play-gull a stool," which were probably written before 1600, though the play was not published until 1610.

² The structure of the Globe and Fortune Mr. Wallace thinks did not allow either custom. Cf. pp. 136, 137.

³ Quoted from Grosart's edition of *The Poems of Davies*.

Mr. Wallace remarks: "Here the gallant is conceived as at the Blackfriars, on the stage (l. 3); or at the public theatre, over the stage (l. 4)" (p. 132). Yet Davies certainly seems to be picturing one character at one theater; if Mr. Wallace's interpretation of "through a grate" is correct,¹ the natural interpretation of the whole passage seems to me to be, in the absence of convincing evidence of a difference between the customs of gallants at the private and public theaters, that spectators sat on the stage and above it at the same time. Furthermore, even the words "over the stage," in epigram 53 of Guilpin's *Skiaetheia* and in Dekker and Wilkins' *Jests to Make You Merry*,² which Mr. Wallace uses to support his position, may not refer to the custom of sitting in the upper room of the stage, if the lords' rooms were at the side of the stage in all theaters, for in *Every Man out of His Humour* (II, 1, ll. 421-23) Carlo satirizes Brisk for speaking of great lords "as familiarly as if he had . . . ta'en tobacco with them over the stage, in the lords' room."³

According to Mr. Wallace's theory, the fad of the Blackfriars was not even adopted later by the public theaters, though it "may be that occasionally a gallant intruded his presence on the public stage" (p. 141). One of his best points is that owing to the structure of several important public theaters, notably the Globe and the Fortune, gallants sitting at the side on the stage "would have cut off the view from the gentlemen's rooms" (p. 138). But we cannot speak with certainty as to the structure of all the public theaters. Nor do fads go by rules of logic. Moreover, a passage in Dekker's *Guls Horne-booke*, chap. vi, which deals explicitly with both public

¹ Malone thought this phrase referred to the boxes in the gallery next to the balcony.

² Dekker's *Works*, II, 292.

³ The use of "lords' room" in the singular here and in the passage from Dekker quoted later and the use of "over" here suggest the possibility that in some theaters the choice place may have been the upper room of the stage. Still the contract for building the Fortune theater after the model of the Globe shows that there were four "gentlemens rooms" in the galleries, probably the lower galleries, in each of these theaters; and the contract for the Hope states that the builder "shall also make two boxes in the lower most storie, fitt and decent for gentlemen to sitt in; And shall make the partitions betweene the roomes as they are at . . . the Swan" (Baker, *Dev. of Sh. as a Dram.*, 316, 322). Moreover, the words Dekker uses in describing the eclipse of the lords' room—"the Stages Suburbs," "thrust into the reare," and "in darknesse"—suit better a picture of the side boxes overshadowed by the audience on the stage than of the upper room merely passing out of fashion. The passage from *Ev. M. out* Mr. Wallace does not seem to have known.

and private playhouses, speaks unequivocally of the boxes as "contemptibly thrust into the reare," while the stage is crowded. The whole passage may be quoted, because, as I interpret the passage, it stresses strongly the fact that the structure of the theater and the inconvenience caused even the highest classes by the custom of sitting on the stage did not check the custom, while the last lines indicate that the opposition of the audiences had no effect, and consequently that the passage quoted below from *The Malcontent* has not necessarily the meaning which Mr. Wallace gives it.

Whether therefore the gatherers of the publique or priuate Play-house stand to receiue the afternoones rent, let our Gallant (hauing paid it) presently aduance himselfe vp to the Throne of the Stage. I meane not into the Lords roome (which is now but the Stages Suburbs): No, those boxes, by the iniquity of custome, conspiracy of waiting-women and Gentlemen-Ushers, that there sweat together, and the couetousness of Sharers, are contemptibly thrust into the reare, and much new Satten is there dambd, by being smothred to death in darknesse. But on the very Rushes where the Commedy is to daunce, yea, and vnder the state of *Cambises* himselfe must our feathered *Estridge*, like a piece of Ordnance, be planted valiantly (because impudently) beating downe the mewes and hisses of the opposed rascality.

This passage Mr. Wallace considers and rejects, as also one in Middleton's *Black Book* concerning "Barnaby Burning-glass, arch tobacco-taker of England . . . upon stages both public and private" (*Works*, ed. Bullen, VIII, 42, 43). "Both," Mr. Wallace says, "are in satires—not reliable repositories of fact" (p. 138). Of a later passage, in Hutton's *Follie's Anatomie* (1619), which advises a gallant to grace "the crowded stage" at the Globe specifically, he says, "But as it is merely a hypothetical case, in a satire at that, I doubt its value" (pp. 136, 137). These are excellent examples of the fashion in which Mr. Wallace rejects material at variance with his theory, for he has already accepted the evidence of the satirists Davies and Guilpin, and of one passage from *The Guls Horne-booke*.

No one, I suppose, questions the fact that the custom of sitting on the stage was more in vogue at Blackfriars than at the public theaters and that the audiences at some of the theaters stood stoutly against it. More than this it does not seem to me necessary to infer even from the passage in the Induction to *The Malcontent* which

Mr. Wallace says (p. 134) denies explicitly the privilege of sitting on the stage at the Globe:

Tire-man.—Sir, the gentlemen will be angry if you sit here.

Sly.—Why, we may sit upon the stage at the private house . . . dost think I fear hissing?

Mr. Wallace certainly deserves the highest honor for the important information that he has been able to gather in regard to Shakespeare and his time, and every student of the Elizabethan drama will regret that he should lessen even in the slightest degree the value of his work by hasty conclusions and fallacious reasoning in his efforts to proclaim startling and revolutionary theories.

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